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Robert Frost's ambiguous attitude to the New England rural community which he used as source material for much of his writing, is well known. Literary critics have also pointed to Frost's personal dilemma of being a public figure,,

often feted by college and university people on the one hand, and his desire for artistic independence and solitude on the other. In his brief study on Frost, Roger D. Sell sheds light on these problems through close readings of some of Frost's lesser known works.

Sell convincingly points out that already the short tales which Frost published in poultry journals from 1903 to 1905, shows Frost's intimate contact with and yet his distance to the farmers' culture he was writing for and about at that time. A few glimpses into some of Frost's stories for children, soon to be published by Sell, link these stories to Frost's favourite rural setting and to a generally optimistic childhood mood, a mood difficult to attain and easily lost in many of Frost's later poems. "Home Burial" is offered as illustration of the tragic loss of the "child's-eye view" in Frost's poetry (p. 45).

Sell chooses Frost's words from 1925 on the death of Amy Lowell as a main guideline for his study. Frost then said that "the most exciting movement in nature is not progress, advance, but expansion and contraction." This is a point well taken. The reader who is familiar with "Birches" is reminded of the going and the coming back, so essential to Frost's assessment of life in that poem. Indeed the theory that Frost put forth in the Lowell-speech: "we explore and adventure for a while and then we draw in to consolidate our gains", may sound as an echo of the poetic conclusion in the last two lines of "Birches" a few years earlier.

This is only one of several statements made by Frost and quoted by Sell which remind us of similar ideas in the writings of William James. In the first part of his book, Sell shows how the thoughts of James made a life-long impact on the poet. "The Will to Believe" and *Pragmatism* are used as key sources, the latter for a dating and an interpretation of the final version of "The Black Cottage" in *North of Boston* (1914). Since the last section of "The Black Cottage" concerns the validity of religious belief and practice, James' famous treatise on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1903) would possibly provide even more relevant background material for comparison than the source used by Sell. When the minister-narrator in "The Black Cottage" informs his companion about the difference of opinion between the younger, more liberal members of his church, and the old woman who stuck to the established creed, he voices a problem discussed at length in James' *Varieties* ... The minister in the poem candidly seeks a midposition between "our liberal youth," who could do without the part about "descended into Hades," and the old lady, "the bonnet in the pew," who neither could nor would. In *Varieties* ... James draws a line between what he calls "the healthy-minded" and "the morbid" kind of religious experience. The very names suggest James' preference for the first, yet he is, exactly like the minister in "The Black Cottage," unable to overlook the more profound sense of darkness and evil so vividly present in the latter. The faith of the old woman, though it may be out of fashion and more based on habit than on conviction, calls for the minister's due respect. Says the minister:

> "For, dear me, why abandon a belief
> Merely because it ceases to be true.
> Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
> It will turn true again, for so it goes."

This philosophy of religion, presented without a touch of irony or sarcasm, indicates that Frost is truly "completely at home in the Jamesian world" as Reuben A. Brower has pointed out in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (1963).

Along with James, Frost felt it necessary, as he once said, to "believe the future in," a quote often referred to by Sell. But not only that. It was equally important for Frost, as it once had been for James, to come to terms with the past. Perhaps we could turn Frost's own phrase to say that in order to live fully in the present he also had to "believe the past in." In the third part of his *Four Studies*, Sell indeed portrays Frost in the process of working out in dramatic form various patterns of his immediate past. Sell argues that Frost's two unpublished plays, "In the Art Factory" and "The Guardeen," are intricately mixed with Frost's own problems as an artist. Maybe that is why they remain largely unsuccessful. Sell's paraphrase of the plays at any rate does not convince the reader of their merit beyond the biographical. As Sell willingly admits, their artistic function comes second to a more important therapeutic purpose for Frost himself. Frost's financial problems, his wife's relation to his art, her death, Frost's political views, all serve as background information to a proper understanding of the texts. The main characters in both plays seem to be caught up with much of the same problem: how to work out the strenuous relationship between the arts and the world, between the independent artist and the market. In tbe ultimate conflict none of the main characters seem able to opt for one or the other or reach a third point where the two sides of the dilemma could be kept in balance. This failure, says Sell, may be indicative of Frost's own problem of finding a way out.

In his introduction Sell argues for the need to write a "literary biography" of Robert Frost, and he modestly offers his own study as "a batch of extended notes" in that direction. It is in this third section of Sell's book that we get the best idea of how the writing of a literary biography may be approached. Here biography and criticism are combined into a synthesis, which gives us a better understanding of the author through an examination of the texts. We need, nevertheless, a more solidly theoretical basis for the term "literary biography" than Sell has given. On the first couple of pages Sell uses the term partly in opposition to the method behind Lawrance Thompson's monumental biography of Frost. Sell's objection to Thompson is that "he does not read Frost's poems as poems, and so conveys little sense of the movement which they, as poetry, represent" (p. 13). Sell is certainly not the first to voice this opinion, yet the alternative: "to read the poem as a poem" does not take us very far either. At this point Sell's study could have benefited from E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s well known study *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), especially the first chapter called "In Defense of the Author." Especially so, because I do not think Sell would find Hirsch's study contradictory to his own very useful endeavour.

Øyvind Gulliksen Telemark Regional College